

## RECOGNITION AND CONTROL OF ACADEMIC JOB STRESS

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the Recognition and Control of Academic Job Stress. Stress arises from a variety of sources. While many sources of stress may be obvious and have apparent signs, many do not. For this reason, identifying potential or actual stressors is important. Once potential stressors have been identified, it is important to then assess the risk; that is, likelihood of particular stressors causing harm and potential outcome. By doing this, university management can gain an understanding of the causes of stress that can be given priority and addressed first, since any intervention programme to manage stress must first determine if stress exists and what is contributing to its existence. This study addresses these issues. The study is a survey research utilizing the ex-post-facto design. A sample of academics, comprising of 614 (79%) males and 166 (21%) females was drawn from 39 universities using the cluster sampling technique. Data collection was done by using a structured questionnaire that comprises the stress scale items. The statistics used were frequencies and percentage and multi-regression analysis. The findings revealed that stress is prevalent among academics in Nigeria public universities; that higher job stress levels among academics are associated with work demands, role conflict, work relationship, career and organizational structure and climate; and that role conflict contributed most significantly to the stress levels, followed by work relationship, then again followed by work demands and finally followed by career stress. Both the implications and necessary recommendations were discussed.

One type of stress is job stress. Job stress occurs when some element of work has a negative impact on an employee physical and mental well-being. In other words, with job stress, the stressors involved are work-related, although stress is not limited to any one particular job or industry. Some researchers have shown that there is a substantial relationship between work and stress (Holt, 1982). This is understandable given the fact that not only is a lot of time spent on work-related activities, but also many individuals identify find a substantial part of their satisfaction and identity in their work. For university academics, stress is intrinsic to their job because of competing demands and pressures generated from several different areas ranging from physical demands to the type of social interaction on the job. The experience of work can lead to a variety of symptoms of stress that can harm the physical and mental health of academics. Stress can be thought of as any event that strains or exceeds an individual's ability to cope (Lazarus, 1993). Although stress has been operationally defined as an adaptive response to an external situation that results in physical, psychological and/or behavioural deviation for organisational participation (Ofotokun, 2004). Although the concept as used in the study evokes negative connotation, Selye (1976) emphasized that some stress is necessary for life and provides part of the stimulus to learn and grow without having an adverse effect on health: that is, stress is viewed here as eustress. But people's ability to deal with pressure is not limitless. When the work place pressure is intense, continuous or repeated and workers perceive that work demands exceed their capacity for effective performance as if often the case with job or occupational stress, then distress develops. Both eustress and distress thus reflect similar physiological responses but different emotional interpretations. That is, your physical reaction to stress is the same for positive and negative stress, the difference however, is that with negative stress, your body never returns to the "pre-stress" relaxed state. You remain tense or anxious which drains you of emotional and physical

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energy. Although, we still do not know enough about positive stressors, that is, the stress that motivates, challenges and provides variety and stimulation at work, it is necessary to help the individual cope with distress, i.e. unwanted strain and pressure. The feelings of distress bring on a myriad of emotional response that have adverse consequences on work performance and possibly of the worker.

The causes of stress don't exist objectively and individuals differ in what they see as a stressor in the first place (Lazarus, 1966). Stress arises from a variety of sources. Knowing what causes stress therefore is the first step in understanding and coping with it. Learning how to deal and control stress is critical to our maximizing our job performance, staying safe on the job and maintaining our physical and mental health. Clearly, job stress affects society as a whole in a variety of ways contributing to rising health care costs, increasing insurance rates and decreasing national productivity. Unfortunately, stress is a common part of life in the 2000s – something few academics can avoid altogether. Partly for this reason and partly because it seems to exert negative effects on both physical health and psychological well-being, stress has become an important topic of research in social psychology.

Infact, the most prominent points of contention in this study revolve around two important questions: (1) Does stress exists among academics in Nigerian Public Universities, (2) If so, what are the causes? and (3) how can stress be controlled?

### **Methodology**

**Design** - This study is a survey research utilizing the ex-post-facto design.

**Subjects** - The subject consisted of all academic staff in Nigerian public universities.

**Sampling** – The cluster multi-stage sampling technique was utilized because the study population is scattered or spread over a very wide area.

**Instruments** – A focus group discussion generated items for the study, based on the need to identify culture-specific factors, basic to academics. Then a content analysis of responses, utilizing experts was conducted. Justification of this was derived from the assertion that the use of expert technique is an acceptable method for achieving content validity (Nunally, 1978). The expert ratings were used to calculate content validity and items that received five judges' agreement were retained. Finally, the 53 stress items developed were jaded to the Blau's items of 62, making a total of 115 items and then subjected to item analysis. Only 46 items were chosen with a least item total correlation of 0.50. The scale was shown to be extremely reliable with a reliability coefficient of 0.98, although Blau reported a reliability coefficient of 0.87.

**Procedure** – The scale items were incorporated into a questionnaire and distributed to 780 respondents.

**Statistics** – The descriptive statistics includes frequencies and percentages. The inferential statistics was multiple regression analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Of course, central to the study is the issue of whether or not academics are stressed in Nigeria Public Universities. In order to ascertain this question, there is need to examine the mean values of job stress factors among academics, as presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Mean Values of Job Stress Among Academics**

S/N	Source		X
1	Total sample		127
	Age:	Young	132.85
		Old	122.25
2	Total sample		128
	Personality profile	Type A	135.16
		Type B	121.03
3	Total sample		126
	Self Esteem	Low	120.10
		High	132.54
4	Total sample		128.5
	Sex	Male	124.43
		Female	133.40

From the table above, it can be seen that the total mean response,  $\bar{X}$  of job stress age-wise is  $\bar{X} = 127$ , with the mean of job stress for younger academics  $\bar{X} = 132$  and  $\bar{X} = 122$  for older academics. This reveals that there is job stress among academics in Nigeria Public Universities since the mean of younger academics is higher than the mean of total sample and is also higher than the mean of older academics and both lie within the interval of stress value of 115-160 (see interpretation scale for job stress in table 3 below).

Similarly, the table indicates that the total mean response  $\bar{X}$  of job stress for sex is  $\bar{X} = 127$ ,  $\bar{X} = 133$  and  $\bar{X} = 124$  for male academics. The result of the study thus indicates that there is job stress among academics since the mean of female academics is higher than the mean of male academics and both lie within the internal of stress value of 115-160 (see interpretation scale for job stress).

**Table 2: Summary Table of the Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Independent and Joint Influence of Work Demands, Role Conflict, Work Relationships, Career Stress and Organisational Structure and Climate.**

Variable	B	Beta	t	P	R <sup>2</sup>	F	P
Wk Demands	61.7158	.2263	38.02	<.001	.972	5540	<.001
Role Conflict	42.1511	.2764	36.91	<.001			
Wk Relationship	48.4739	.2719	38.87	<.001			
Career stress	44.6570	.2521	33.46	<.001			
Org. structure & climate	51.7715	.2734	35.210	<.001			
Constant	-219.7344		-96.337				

As table 2 shows, stressors arising from work demands, role conflict, work relationships, career and organisational structure and climate significantly jointly influence or predict stress levels among academics.  $F = 5540$ ,  $df (5,774)$ ,  $P < .001$ . The  $R^2 (.972)$  showed that work demands, role conflict, work relationship, career stress and organisational structure and climate contributed 79% variation in predicting stress levels among academics. The beta weight showed that role conflict (.276) contributed most significantly to the stress levels among academics, closely followed by

organisational structure and climate (.273), then work relationship (.271), then again by work demands (.266) and finally followed by career stress (.252).

**Table 3: Interpretation for Questionnaire Which Measure Job Stress**

High stress	161-184
Stress	115-160
Moderate stress	69-114
Low stress	46-68

### **Interpretation**

The interpretation for the table above can be stated thus: after statements related to the job stress scale items have been collected by the researcher, the respondents were asked to respond to each statement using the Likert Scaling techniques, by indicating whether they; (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) uncertain, (4) Disagree and (5) strongly disagree. These five categories are then scored, using 5,4,3,2,1 respectively for favourable statements and the reverse order for unfavourable statements. Individuals scores are achieved by totaling the item scores of each statement. This total can be compared with the maximum possible score of 60 (5X12) and a minimum score of 12 (1X12) if an individuals' total amounts to 50, it would indicate a decidedly positive attitude to the research problem.

### **Discussion**

The findings of the study revealed that the stress levels among academic sin Nigeria Public Universities is very high indeed and that the overall quality of working life is declining, although some academics are predisposed to cope better.

The findings also suggest that role conflict contributed most significantly to the stress levels among academics followed by organisational structure and climate, then followed by work demands and finally followed by career stress. The Pareto principle, or phenomenon of the 'vital few' and 'trivial many' applicable to many industrial, organisational settings suggest that resources can be best used by addressing the big problem area first and then proceedings to lesser priority areas

The findings also suggest that since stress factors contributed 77% variation in predicting stress levels, other factors need to be accounted for. This is a task for future research. The results are supported by previous findings which revealed that academics are dissatisfied with the factors intrinsic to the job itself, the organisational structure or climate in which they work and home/work interface.

### **Conclusion**

Research has shown that academics jobs had become more stressful in recent years, punctuate by increasing levels of turnover and absenteeism, early retirement, dissatisfaction, heightened anxiety and decrease in performance. As such, stress in the workplace is a problem of considerable significance. Stress arises from a variety of sources. Knowing what causes stress is the first step in understanding and controlling it. The study revealed that stress arising from work demand role conflict, work relationships, career and organisational structure and climate significantly and jointly influence or predict stress levels among academics in Nigerian Public Universities. The focus should be on eliminating or reducing those work environments as the way to reducing academic job stress. Accordingly, management should look at the design of job and organisational structure and conduct detailed study such as this to identify priorities for action.

### **Recommendations**

Against the preceding discussions, the following recommendations were made:

A stress management programme should be considered for academics in Nigerian Federal Universities. This programme should include:

1. Cognitive approach to help academics reappraise the nature of job stressors and restructure relevant conjunctions (cognitive restructuring) Psychotherapeutic approaches in order to alter psychological processes that give use to dysfunctional behaviour.  
Cognitive coping strategies replace autotrophic thinking with thoughts in which stressors are viewed as a challenge rather than threats. This strategy can help academics think more clearly, rationally and constructively in the face of stress and may generate a more hopeful emotional state. Positive self-talk can potentially change stress perceptions by increasing our self-efficacy and developing a more optimistic outlook at least in that situations (Mc shane & Glinow, 2000).
2. Psychotherapeutic approaches may prove effective in altering psychological processes that give rise to dysfunctional stress reaction patterns. It attempts to work through the stress experiences to support the adaptive mechanisms and remove obstacles that stand by the way of the person's well-being (Ugwuegbu, 1999). Some of the elements in this approach include diagnosis (person with problem asks for help), treatment (counseling or supportive therapy are provided). If staff within the establishment can't help, the person is referred to professionals in community, screening (periodic examination of individuals are provided to detect early indications of problems and prevention) educating and persuading individuals that something must be done to help them cope with stress.
3. Behaviour modification techniques may be applied to minimize the impact of stressors. Stress – inoculation training, for example, is a behaviour modification technique designed to prevent stress; individuals are educated about their stressful experience, given training in coping techniques and allowed to role-play their new coping skills in various situations. Relevant physiological processes have been the target of some behaviour modification programme; in which subjects were trained to recognize and control their somatic reactions in stressful situations (Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Time management is another example. An academic might keep track of his time for a week and start a time management plan. The first step is to set out a schedule that shows how his time is now spent; then decide how to allocate his time in the future. A time management plan can help control catastrophizing though by providing reassurance that there is enough time to everything and a plan for handling it all. Behavioural coping strategies also include pharmacological methods, that is, the use of drugs (such as anti-anxiety agents or minor tranquillizers). When used in moderation and for relatively short periods of time, these drugs have been very helpful in reducing anxiety and making it easier for the individual to function in the day-to-day world.

### **Organizational Change**

Organizational changes should be geared towards eliminating job stress arising from role conflict, organisational structure and climate, work demands, career and work relationships. This is to alter the conditions that seem to produce uncontrollable stressful experience. Specifically in this area, the following recommendations should be considered.

Possible solutions to minimize the problems associated with role-based stress include clear and stable job descriptions and tasks assignments, redefine the person's role, reduce role ambiguity by redistributing the work, supporting supervisory styles, participative decision making and prior agreed mechanism to reduce conflict; open discussion of potential and real conflict. Besides, employee assistance programme (EAP) (also called work/life initiatives) can be introduced to academics to

balance their work and non-work roles. The initiative should provide more flexible workplace for academics (particularly women) with children. In short, where the home and work interface are combining to upset an academic mental and emotional well-being, a sensitive employee assistance programme will allow the academic access to appropriate services to resolve these conflicts. High quality, available on-campus childcare for both infants and preschool children is a key factor in providing support for faculty parents; sensitivity training i.e. promoting greater sensitivity of family issues by initiating discussion of faculty issues among faculty and administrators, thus facilitating more open discussion and perhaps greater support for individuals striving to balance work and family responsibilities is critical. For it could be argued here that exploration of work-family stress is also quite important for men in academics, as it is becoming much more common for men to assume a greater degree of parenting responsibilities. Moreover, aggression can be diffused by establishing procedures that minimize dysfunctional conflict and ensure that workplace decisions are perceived as fair. Of course, academics can also take an active role in removing stressors. If academics experience stress due to ambiguous role expectations for example, they might seek more information from others to clarify these expectations. If a particular task is too challenging, they might break it into smaller sets of task so that the overall project is less threatening or wearing. Work place violence can also be minimized by learning to identify early warning signs of aggression in students or co-workers and by developing interpersonal skills that dissipate aggression. Although, it is not easy to face up to problems, assertiveness and competences can be learned in the course of experience. By finding good models to initiate and empowering ourselves with information and skills, we equip ourselves to cope rather than merely defend.

Possible solutions to minimize the problems associated with organisational structure and climate include clarity in work assignments, the consistent application of clearly stated organisational policies and a timely and free flow of easily accessible information; an early resolution of the uncertainty stemming from job insecurity, or redundancy. Also, the provision of some control over the appropriate aspects of the work and the workplace, perhaps through participation decision-making. Give academics an input into school policy to acknowledge that their opinion matters (Borg, M.G & Ridding, R.G. 1993). Obviously, they must adhere to the curriculum but may perhaps be given a slightly looser reign; increase respect for academics, for example, by televised teaching awards (Mueller, 1965) have recently tried to raise the profile and attractiveness of the profession. Performance monitoring with relevant feedback to individual academics is also critical. Good appraisal systems allow individuals to discover how others view them, and to ascertain ways in which they might improve their approach. Also, improved communication systems are essentials to allow academics to network and share knowledge of good practices. Structured communication links between staff in an inter-school context could be an addition that would allow staff to make available valuable information concerning students. Increased numbers of support staff would also be useful to help relieve academics of the bureaucratic burden. Using specialist staff and new technology could make a significant difference to a large number of academics. In addition, improve training systems, critically; in-service training should be on-going to renew enthusiasm, tackle new issues and to ensure that incoming staff are properly trained; teaching should be considered like any other profession where ongoing training is essential. Statistical tests indicated that participant's well being after training was significantly higher than at pre-training and that this benefit was maintained at three months (Davidson, M.J. & Cooper, C.L. 1981). Above all, strong management commitment should be exhibited. Anything less than total support from top management raises questions about the sincerity of management commitment in the eyes of employees, government agencies and the public at large. There is thus need to develop a climate in the University system where stress is seen as an interesting, understandable and, up to a point, an inevitable accompaniment to high levels of demand. It needs to be on the agenda, both formal and informal of most if not all staff rooms. This change can arise by increasing awareness of problems faced by academics and by offering more training to deal with the

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reality of what academics face in the classroom. Academics should also be encouraged to speak publicly about their problems.

To manage interpersonal interactions effectively, academics need to learn how to operate successfully in our individual interactions with others. Interpersonal skills influence the academic's ability to work well with people. Because academics must deal with others, they must develop their

abilities to lead, motivate and communicate effectively with those around them. They must focus more on interpersonal skills such as being a team player, sharing information with others and teaching and helping people to learn. The ability to get along with many diverse types of people and exchange information with them is vital for a successful career in academics.

Actually, interpersonal skills can be learned through education and training as well as developed through experience. Organizations increasingly utilize advanced programmes on leadership skills and team leadership as they seek to capitalize on the advantages of self-managed teams. Such training will enhance social transaction in work groups and make it more likely that members will affect each other positively, transmit and reinforce similar work attitudes and thus exchange work-related views and solve problems. The familiarity and enhanced relationship among the workforce that is brought about, is bound to have beneficence effect on the University system. According to Carol, D. (1990), social relations which are enhanced by interpersonal skills is health-enhancing and stress-reducing.

Accordingly, in order to develop interpersonal skills among academics, a clear understanding of the principles embodied in Covey (1989) remarkable book, "The Seven Habits of Effective Human Beings" is strongly recommended.

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